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## Educator Researched Methods and Interventions That Increase Below Level Readers' Fluency and Comprehension

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## **Introduction**

Year after year, students enter the classroom several grades below grade level yet are expected to perform as an on-grade level student. One of the major learning gaps, that is daunting to see in fourth grade, are students who are extremely below grade level in the area of reading. To an outsider, it may look as though it is only one subject. No big deal! Unfortunately, reading is the foundation to all content areas. A student who is not successful in reading will most likely have difficulties in other areas of learning. Reading provides the foundation of understanding and that foundation begins with reading fluency. Researcher Timothy Rasinski, along with countless other researchers, such as Kodan and Akoyl, The National Reading Panel, and Samuels and Leberge, carry the belief that students who build a foundation of fluency through practice and increase that fluency will develop the ability to comprehend on higher levels (2003). Without this foundation, the learning gap begins and continues to widen year after year. Thus, showing the huge relationship between reading fluency and reading comprehension (Rasinski, 2003). These below grade level readers need interventions that meet them where they are and push them forward to meet their learning goals - enabling them to become better readers. The purpose of this study was to address the needs of below-level readers and to aid in the vertical alignment of research-based interventions and methods in grades 3-5.

## **Literature Review**

### **The Importance of Reading Fluency and Reading Comprehension**

#### ***Reading fluency***

Reading Fluency provides students with the key foundational skills they need to cross the bridge to reading comprehension. There are many definitions of reading fluency. The National

Reading Panel (NRP) defines reading fluency as having the ability to read not only with speed and accuracy, but also expression (2000). Researchers Leberge and Samuels define reading fluency as having the ability to interpret letters to sound to words in an effortless manner (1974). Kodan and Akyol (2018) define fluency as "reading words correctly, fast, and automatically without additional effort" (p.161). Each of these definitions puts a large emphasis on the speed of reading. Rasinski warns that reading should not be taught or perceived as a race to win, but must include prosody, interpretive and meaningful reading (2000). These vast arrays of reading fluency definitions show the wide span that fluency covers and prove how it is seen as the foundation to reading.

Developing reading fluency in young students is a key factor in predicting the type of reader a student will become. A lack of a good reading foundation creates learning gaps, thus showing a strong relationship between fluency and comprehension (Rasinski, 2003). Therefore, it is extremely important to develop these skills. To develop fluency, students need to be given multiple opportunities to hear fluent reading, as well as opportunities to hear others use meaningful expression (Griffith, L. & Rasinski, T., 2004). The NRP stresses the importance of focusing on fluency for developing readers and having teachers regularly assess students' fluency in order to follow student development. There are two main reasons for the importance of assessing: First, reading fluency is a major indicator of reading comprehension, and secondly, assessments allow teachers to dig deeper into the struggles the students are having in reading and develop a plan to address those issues and help the student grow in their ability to read (2000). Through fluency instruction, students are given the opportunity to interact with a text in various ways (repeated readings, choral readings, partner readings) allowing them to gain the ability to process the text in an efficient manner.

A fluent reader moves from the constant process of sounds to having comprehension as the purpose for their reading. They can read more rapidly, which opens their mental capacity for comprehending (Rasinski, 2003). By opening a student's mental capacity that was once taken up applying fluency strategies, students are then able to analyze the text they are reading and instantaneously apply appropriate strategies needed to comprehend. Developing a student's ability to read fluently and with little to no effort helps to establish the reading skills necessary to create an "on grade level" reader that can attain the ability to comprehend.

### ***Studies on reading fluency***

Several studies have been completed over the years to show the true effect that fluency has on readers years later in their educational journey. Taleda (2007) sought to find the relationship between oral reading fluency and comprehension. During this study, second- and third-graders in a New York private school were studied in order to determine the relationship between fluency and comprehension in which the participants were assessed using the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Skills (DIEBELS) and the TerraNova Basic Multiple Assessment by McGraw-Hill Publishing Company. Upon the completion of the study and statistical analysis, it was found that students showed proof of a strong correlation between reading fluency and comprehension. The second-graders who participated showed a strong positive correlation once data was analyzed, while the third-grade participants indicated a very strong positive correlation between both components of reading. Ultimately, researchers found that students who were able to read more quickly and comprehend more thoroughly.

Similar results were found in Griffith and Rasinski's (2004) study that focused on the impact of incorporating fluency into the reading curriculum. This action research details how the implementation of fluency enhancing strategies enhanced students' comprehension when utilized

simultaneously within the reading curriculum. These students spent third and fourth grade with Mrs. Griffith where the study continued until the results were analyzed. The results of Griffith's action research showed a great impact on struggling readers who made gains in fluency and over all reading proficiency. The implementation of fluency and comprehension not only impacted the Title 1 students: Growth was seen in all the readers' reading performance. Griffith's shift in making fluency an integral part of reading versus an intervention seemed to result in students' reading levels soaring at fast rates as well as them gaining the ability to think more critically and meaningfully about what they were reading. Ultimately, Griffith found that fluency needs to be coached and practiced with this knowledge, so students will grow into readers that think critically about what they are reading and build up their comprehension abilities.

### ***Reading comprehension***

Comprehension has been shown as a direct product of the ability to read fluently. The NRP states that fluency provides the bridge between word recognition and reading comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000). Through fluency, students are given the opportunity to interact with a text in various ways (repeated readings, choral readings, partner readings) allowing them to gain the ability to process the text in an efficient manner. A fluent reader moves from the constant process of sounds to having comprehension as the purpose for their reading. They can read more rapidly, which opens their mental capacity for comprehending (Talada, 2007). There is no longer a power struggle between word recognition and comprehension.

Comprehension is defined as reading with a purpose and having the ability to think actively by making connections and using schema (Armbruster, 2001). This active process allows students to build new learning as they combine new information with their current

knowledge, thus allowing the reader to make sense of the text and ultimately reach a level of comprehension in which the reader can now simultaneously identify written word, gain meaning from those words, and build understanding. With this understanding comes the ability to interpret, analyze, criticize, synthesize, connect, infer, and evaluate a text (Kodan & Akyol, 2018). The bridge built by foundational reading skills leading to comprehension gives readers the ability to make sense of a text and dig deeper into its meaning.

By reaching the step of comprehension in the reading process, students can automatically carry out the basic strategies of reading. These strategies allow for the student to move towards the development of higher-level thinking. Once this level of reading is achieved, students “are able to rely extensively upon the meaning of the passage” allowing the student to fully comprehend the text they are reading (Talada, 2007). By opening a student’s mental capacity that was once taken up by applying fluency strategies, students are then able to analyze the text they are reading and instantaneously apply appropriate strategies needed to comprehend. This understanding of the text structure promotes application and comprehension (Talada, 2007). This achievement allows the reader a more enjoyable experience as a reader.

### ***Reading Difficulties***

Several factors can affect a reader’s ability to comprehend, leading to a learning gap that pushes the reader far below the level they should be. Reading difficulties are defined as a reader having difficulty comprehending words and phrases while reading and analyzing sentence structure (Kodan & Akoyl, 2018). Kodan and Akyol (2018) note that difficulty in reading can be observed as lacking the ability to get meaning from a text as a reader must use their schema to make sense of and understand a text. Factors such as speed, resolution, ability to summarize, metacognition, vocabulary, and reading interest have all been noted as key factors that inhibit the

ability to comprehend. To tackle the reading needs of struggling readers, researchers agree that there is a large amount of support that suggests repeated readings as a key factor in fluency growth. Through repeated readings, students are provided the support they need to grow in fluency and are able to familiarize themselves with tough vocabulary and the sequence of the text, thus producing effective readers with a strong ability to comprehend.

Studies have shown that readers who have difficulty reading in first grade will most likely still be below level readers in fourth grade. In 2003, data showed that only 32% of readers in fourth grade were considered proficient according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (Menzies, Mahdavi, & Lewis, 2008). This struggle in the area of reading must be tackled and the only effective way to do so is creating effective reading instruction. Menzies, Mahdavi, and Lewis state that, "effective reading instruction is predicted on educators skillfully negotiating the knowledge and management demands that "balanced" reading instruction requires. Without an understanding of the components of effective reading instruction, teachers may not have the skills necessary to prevent reading failure for at risk students" (p. 27). This shows that educators must be equipped with the knowledge and resources to help prevent below level readers and to help grow those readers that have already fallen behind. This knowledge can simply be attained through peer collaboration by the building of a repertoire of interventions and strategies that have successfully been implemented within classrooms and have shown growth in reading proficiency.

### ***Correlation between reading fluency and reading comprehension***

The correlation between reading fluency and reading comprehension is a well-carried belief among educational researchers. For students to become successful readers, establishing a

mastery of basic foundational skills is key. Rasinski (2000) tells of how students who build a foundation of fluency through practice will successfully develop the ability to comprehend on higher levels. Sanchez (2010) elaborates on the correlation between reading comprehension and fluency and the vast amount of research that shows their relationship; "research consistently demonstrates an association between reading fluency and reading comprehension, such that greater fluency is associated with greater comprehension and poor fluency is associated with less comprehension" (p. 11). Kodan and Akyol (2018) refer to research completed by the National Reading Panel that "in order to achieve adequate levels of reading, individuals should gain fluent reading skills, which is one of the basic rudiments of reading" (p.160). The key to becoming a successful reader begins at the earliest stages of reading. The foundational skills that include fluency enable readers to gain the skills necessary to read to understand and comprehend. The lack of these skills, on the other hand, creates the beginning of below level readers and the gaps in learning that these readers often exhibit.

### ***Conclusion***

Many students enter the classroom lacking the foundation of reading. They are not fluent readers and therefore, cannot carry out the necessary process to understand and comprehend the text they are reading. This can cause frustration for the learner in various subjects, as comprehension is a key factor to carry out most content area tasks. There are many tried-and-true teaching and intervention methods to help move below grade level readers through the process of fluency and to the mastery of comprehension. As an educator, this can seem as a daunting task, as going through thousands of teaching methods and interventions can be overwhelming. This qualitative, interpretivist study will present learning methods that are research based by educators that have shown positive growth in bridging the gap between fluency and reading



comprehension allowing students to advance their level of reading and move closer to the on-grade level status in reading.

### **Rationale for this study**

As teachers, our main goal is to help our students be successful. This entails closing the gaps that exists within our classroom through the utilization of methods and interventions that we have seen to prove themselves successful. Many upper elementary schools see a significant learning gap in their student's ability to read on grade level. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), only 35% of fourth grade readers are considered on grade level (2019). This data is very concerning, as standardized assessments, such as the Georgia Milestones, are based on a reader's ability to read on grade level. NAEP data shows that the reading scores for fourth graders were 3% lower in 2019 than 2017 (2019). The question to be asked is, if our students are not reading on grade level and exhibit a learning gap in the area of reading, what are we, as teachers, doing to close the reading gap and get our students on track in terms of on grade level reading?

This research seeks to determine what educators view as the most beneficial teaching methods and interventions that increase student reading fluency and comprehension leading them to on level reading growth. The following research questions will be addressed:

- According to teachers, which teaching methods and interventions most enhance below grade level reader's fluency?
- According to teachers, which teaching methods and interventions most enhance below grade level reader's comprehension?

These questions may guide upper elementary teachers in a streamlined approach to develop reading fluency and comprehension in a way that is successful for both students and teachers while allowing a vertical alignment of practices to be developed across grade levels.

The process of learning to read begins at an early age, but if the lack of foundational skills is not developed, it causes the reader to become more and more behind academically. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that our educators are equipped with the skills and strategies they need to help all learners, especially those who have learning gaps specifically in reading as teachers play such a large role in creating successful readers. Blair, Rupley, and Nichols (2007) agree with the impact effective teachers have in preparing readers for success as they state "... that teachers are knowledgeable about the research on the teaching of reading and make informed decisions based on this research data" (p.433). This implies that effective educators are well equipped with the knowledge to design interventions and methods needed to help below grade level readers progress in their reading journey. It is important that we take time to recognize these effective teachers and the interventions and methods they have deemed and seen firsthand as successful in helping students fill learning gaps in reading in order to progress towards on grade level reading.

### **Conceptual Framework**

This research study will follow the Interpretivism Paradigm. This view assumes that we construct reality through meanings that we develop socially, and that we cannot separate ourselves from what we know. Therefore, the researcher is highly involved not only in the collection of perceptions but also in the meanings being made throughout the data collection process. Moreover, the participants' understandings of the meanings behind their actions are negotiable, dynamic, and worthy of consideration. The goal of learning, in this view, is more in

depth about methods and interventions that experienced educators *feel* enhance below grade level readers by bridging the gap between fluency and comprehension. The educator's perceptions are viewed as valid, whether or not they mirror external, positivist "research-based methods" (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2020).

Throughout this study, a repertoire of interventions and methods that have shown success in helping students advance in reading will be created based on informal teacher action research. The teacher surveys collected teachers' "tried-and-true" interventions and methods that have successfully helped educators work towards closing the learning gap in reading fluency and comprehension. Interpretive data will bring understanding into what research-based strategies have successfully helped upper elementary teachers develop their readers and increase student reading fluency and comprehension by conducting qualitative interpretive research. The use of the interpretive paradigm lends itself to the gaining of data that will represent multiple perspectives in the area of enhancing readers and closing the fluency gap (Thanh, & Thanh, 2015). This was carried out through the analysis of educator written research collected through surveys, as "accessing the perspectives of several members" of the educational world about this topic "can suggest some cultural patterns of thought and action" in terms of beneficial and successful methods of increasing student fluency and comprehension (Glesne, 2016). The analysis of educator research will help articulate the progression towards developing on-grade level readers through teacher approved and researched based studies. To gain insight from educators about the best teaching methods and interventions that most enhance below grade level reader's fluency and comprehension this study utilizes, an Interpretivism approach. This "interpretive tradition" consists of the collection of data through participant observation and interviewing. The basis of this research is acquiring from teachers their tried and true methods of

meeting below level reader's and building them up. In essence, the description of educators' views of best practices in reading comprehension and fluency on the elementary, grades 3-5, level.

## **Methodology**

### ***Data Collection***

The data collection instrument for this research study was an anonymous survey completed through an email link. The survey focused on the educator's views of effective fluency and comprehension strategies and interventions that they have seen firsthand make an impact on below-level readers. Six grades 3-5 educators were interviewed at an elementary school located in Northwest Georgia. This school is a charter school system meaning they operate under terms set between the system and the Georgia Board of Education. They are a separate entity from Georgia public schools, as they have flexibility in terms of certain state mandates. This allows for this school system to meet the needs of their students academically in ways that they feel necessary to allow for growth in student achievement and success.

This school was chosen due to the researcher currently teaching there and having the goal to search for a collection of the most efficient and beneficial ways to meet the needs of below level readers, as the chosen schools population of students is changing greatly year to year. The school is seeing many more below level readers come through than there has been in years past, therefore seeking out from fellow educators' best practices in this area may be of benefit to the entire school and other educators.

The six participants in this study participated through a volunteer response. The educators vary in race, age, experience, and the grade level they teach. These educators have been part of

discussions of the changing demographics within the school and the drive to pinpoint effective strategies to meet the needs of each student within the school and close the learning gap in reading that exists. The researcher's relationship has minimal effect on the survey process as the survey focuses solely on the views of the educators in terms of how they are moving below level readers and is completely anonymous without any traceable identification.

### ***Data Analysis***

The survey was analyzed through thematic content analysis. The researcher analyzed the survey answers to find common patterns of themes within the educators' responses. Anderson (2007) defines thematic content analysis "as a descriptive presentation of qualitative data... that takes the form of interview transcripts" (p.1). Thematic content of the surveys were grouped and analyzed for commonalities. All anonymous response data was organized into a spreadsheet format and from there color coded based on the theme of these responses. The common themes were then further analyzed to truly depict the perception of the educators and their use of each intervention, method, and strategy to grow students in the area of reading. Once these themes were coded, an overall theme was developed along with supporting subgroupings. The common themes presented from the data were then compiled to form a descriptive data analysis on the most utilized effective strategies for promoting growth in below level readers and how these educators are working to move students toward fluency and comprehension success based on the needs of the schools current demographics and academic needs.

## ***Findings***

***When struggling readers are lacking in the area of fluency what is your go to method to increase fluency? What other methods have you seen success with, in terms of increasing reading fluency?***

Data provided by the teachers showed a varied assortment of answers in terms of increasing fluency as fluency is the first building block on the bridge to comprehension. Ultimately, the common response was the importance of repeated readings within small groups and partnerships. As one teacher stated, “In terms of interventions, my go to interventions include repeated readings at the student’s instructional level... students need a great amount of practice reading a text whether it be small group, one-on-one, or partner instruction.” We also see the mention of modeling and scaffolding come to surface multiple times during this portion of the survey and several times during the remainder of the survey, thus prompting notation of this repetition and what it could mean for the study and thematic analysis. The strong unity in the power of repeated readings and fluency was followed by several other strategies including, phonics, word sorts, decoding, varied reading strategies: choral reading, partner reading, chunk reading, and building reading stamina. These outliers were analyzed for deeper meaning in terms of developing themes within the educator responses of the survey (see Table 1).

Table 1:

Participant	<b>When struggling readers are lacking in the area of fluency what is your go to method to increase fluency? What other methods have you seen success with, in terms of increasing reading fluency?</b>
P3	Word sorts, phonics
P4	Repeated readings, fluency pairs, read alouds, chunking, repetition, small groups, partners
P5	Modeling, repeated readings, reading aloud on a lower Lexile

P6	Repeated readings, partner reading
P7	Repeated readings- whole group, small groups, partners, independently, continuous strategies and feedback, goal setting, progress monitoring
P8	Repeated readings in partners and within small groups, phonics and decoding strategies

*When students are lacking the ability to exhibit reading comprehension based on reading assessment data, what is your go to method to increase comprehension abilities of these students? What other methods have you been successful with for increasing students' abilities to comprehend?*

Once again data collected from the survey showed a wide variety of strategies in place to address struggling readers in the area of comprehension in response to reading assessment data. Most educators agreed on the power in building vocabulary and utilizing vocabulary strategies in context, as well as the value in teaching reading strategies that will serve the student beyond the reading content standards. Teachers mentioned the importance of having students gain the ability to interact with the text through application of the strategies and how to successfully recognize and apply ways of thinking to understand a text during whole group, small group, and partnered instruction. Other methods mentioned for increasing reading comprehension included modeling/scaffolding (repeated readings, read aloud, partner reading), instructional software programs that differentiate learning based on data like MobyMax, and the value of reading on-level texts (see Table 2).

Table 2:

Participant	<b>When students are lacking the ability to exhibit reading comprehension based on reading assessment data, what is your go to method to increase comprehension abilities of these students? What other methods have you been successful with for increasing students' abilities to comprehend?</b>
P3	Modeling reading strategies, reading on-level independently, being read to above level

P4	Self-monitoring strategies being taught in small group, reading strategies: prediction, KWL, highlighting, jigsaw strategy, turn and talk
P5	Checking ability to comprehend passages read aloud during small group instruction, previewing vocabulary, repeated readings
P6	Small groups, reading strategies
P7	Comprehension strategies and application, daily practice
P8	Vocabulary strategies, prefix/suffix strategies, read alouds, peer readings

***What strategies do you implement DAILY to strengthen your below level readers, and do you prefer utilizing these strategies through read alouds, small group reading, or partner reading?***

The survey data collection showed that most teachers prefer all three methods for implementing reading strategies for struggling readers: small group, partners, and one-on-one. One contributor to the survey stated, “all students need to hear what strong reading and interaction with a text looks and sounds like, especially those who are struggling in reading” (P6, March 11, 2020). To develop the skills needed for below level reading in the various groupings, each teacher exhibited similar views on the strategies used including, reading daily with on level texts, multiple readings, reviewing/modeling comprehension strategies, and using the text to answer texts related questions (restate and answer). One educator elaborates on the strategies they use:

“Listen, read, and write each and every day! My readers listen to above grade level text and think alouds that model the use of strategies, vocabulary, and structure. They read texts within their level to practice those strategies. Afterwards, they talk about what they’ve read. Finally, they write about what they’ve read. Every students journey through that process is unique and tailored to their abilities and needs. This routine



happens at Tier 2, not just those students who are below. The only thing that changes is the amount of scaffolding and supports needed to move them through.”

This educator’s survey responses encompassed the majority of what the other educators described as effective implementation of reading strategies in many different ways to reach all readers individual needs (See Table 3).

Table 3:

Participant	<b>What strategies do you implement DAILY to strengthen your below level readers, and do you prefer utilizing these strategies through read alouds, small group reading, or partner reading?</b>
P3	Reading on level texts, small group reading
P4	Balanced literacy, writing and responding to reading, independent reading, guided reading, partner reading
P5	Reading every night for homework, repeated readings of passages (twice), using restate and answer for reading prompts and looking back in the text, underlining information to prove answers. Prefers all- read alouds: as it is important for readers to hear how fluent readers read, small group: comfort of being with readers at the same ability level, and partner reading: having someone to help them and encourage them
P6	Partner reading
P7	Listen, read, talk, and write every day, modeling strategies, vocabulary instruction, scaffolding to provide support, all three (read alouds, small group, and partner reading) are essential.
P8	High/low partner reading (one slightly above, one slightly below), vocabulary strategies, prefers small group reading: allows for more 1-1 connection, but allows them to hear others read.

***When working in small groups and partners, do you have a preferred way to partner/group your below level readers?***

The overall commonality between the surveys was the use of high/low partners and groupings based on data to establish partnerships and small groups for reading. Several teachers mentioned the use of the Student Reading Inventory by Scholastic which ranks

students according to their Lexile and the Vanderbilt created Peer Assisted Learning Strategy (PALS). Through these data collection methods and strategies, educators discussed how they group students with partners slightly higher than the other, as well as, varied groupings to allow readers a chance to peer assist (PALS) and see what on-level reading looks and sounds like. When it came to small groups, the educators commonly discussed same level groups in order to provide the needed reading strategies to support all students within the group. In response to PALS it was elaborated on the specific protocol and method that the strategy provided a way to match students with each other and to the text they are working with. Overall, the data supported the utilization of varying levels of readers for partners as educators saw fit, while keeping close leveled readers in small groups (See Table 4).

Table 4:

Participant	<b>When working in small groups and partners, do you have a preferred way to partner/group your below level readers?</b>
P3	I partner them with an above level reader- higher/lower partner
P4	I mix it up- pair higher and lower, equal levels, free choice
P5	List students highest to lowest, split the list in half, and match them (highest reader paired with middle reader).
P6	<i>No response given.</i>
P7	Vanderbilt's PAL's strategy-includes partner reading and specific protocol and method to matching readers with each other and to the text.
P8	I look at Reading Inventory scores and partner with someone slightly above their level (high/low partners)

***Is there a learning program or instructional software that you have found to be successful in aiding students with reading fluency and comprehension?***

The data collection in this portion of the survey showed several in agreement with the program RAZ-Kids by Learning A-Z, as this is a school wide implemented program for assisting readers of all levels. Other educators added their use of Developmental Reading

Assessments (DRAs), the Reading Mastery Program by McGraw/Hill, and any high-level evidence-based reading programs that have been proven to work. Several teachers elaborated on their desire to use a variety of reading resources to target student reading needs and to close gaps, while providing differentiation to meet individual student needs. Overall, the desire for differentiation and evidence-based programs were the major focus for these educators (see Table 5).

Table 5:

Participant	<b>Is there a learning program or instructional software that you have found to be successful in aiding students with reading fluency and comprehension?</b>
P3	DRAs to test comprehension and fluency
P4	RAZ Kids/Reading A-Z, but I prefer an eclectic approach using lots of different things.
P5	Reading Mastery- a great way to help young readers decode words to help them read more fluently. This program is differentiated, and the students work through levels to increase their Lexile.
P6	<i>No response given.</i>
P7	There is so much available. I am not a fan of boxed programs, rather the high-leverage and evidence- based practices that have been proven to work
P8	Raz Kids

When educators were asked how they enhance below grade level readers fluency and comprehension, it is clear that there were many different strategies, methods, and interventions to achieve the goal of closing the reading gap that exists in the education world. However, results of this study has indicated a common theme amongst all the educators who participated in this study, which was that modeling and scaffolding learning are key when seeking to reach below level readers and help them enhance their fluency and comprehension skills. No matter the route the educators reported they used in their classroom, the ultimate theme continuously repeated was strategies, methods, or skills to be modeled and scaffolded

daily for reading fluency and comprehension growth. The findings indicated that exposing students to reading on a daily basis is a key factor for reading growth that allows for varying opportunities to see, hear, and practice reading whether it be a read aloud, partners, or a small group. The main goal was to provide a grand experience with reading through modeling and scaffolding of learning allowing students to gain understanding of the reading strategies necessary to be successful readers.

Sprinkled throughout each survey answer the educators who participated in the study continuously reiterated the use of groupings in order to reach below level readers and enhance their fluency and comprehension skills. These groupings include whole group, small group, and partners. During whole group instruction students are given the opportunity to see and hear a fluent reader interact with a text and exhibit good reading skills through think alouds where the reader essentially thinks aloud while reading to illustrate to students what good reading sounds like and the thinking process that goes into reading thus modeling the use of reading strategies and fluent reading. Through this process the beginnings of scaffolding takes place as readers are able to take away what they have seen and imitate what good reading sounds and looks like whether it be in small group or partners.

The educators described the use of small groups allowing them to delve deep into the reading and fluency strategies that students need in order to grow and develop as readers. As P4 stated, “this is when teaching self-monitoring, metacognition, and fix-up strategies for use during reading takes place.” Several participants described remediation or “fix-up” strategies as a balanced literacy approach in which blending and segmenting words, word work, and fluency practice that can be tailored to the specific group and the individual student needs takes place. The use of instructional level texts being read aloud in a small group allows for

the use of an approach to fluency and comprehension instruction that initiates immediate feedback and strategies to improve fluency and comprehension. Through this feedback and tailored strategies educators responded how the utilization of choral reading, repeated readings, and turn and talk, where students are prompted to share with peers as modeled during whole group and small group instruction, allows for immediate data collection that can then be a source for partnering students and continue the scaffolding of reading to the next step.

Partner reading allows readers to work with a classmate to practice and develop reading skills learned in whole and small group. One participant stated, “there is so much research that supports the use of partner reading. If done correctly with a clear protocol, it can be very effective for struggling readers—and all readers!” This protocol is referred to by several teachers as the PALs approach and by others as high/low partners. Another participant described high/low partners as “I have my students in a list from highest readers to lowest readers. I split the list in half, then match them with the same number partner. For instance, if I have 24 students, I will have two lists 1-12. The second number one is the middle of my class, so my highest reader would be paired with that student and so on.” Responses also revealed that the use of on-level or slightly below level texts within partnerships have shown growth for below-level readers according to individual teacher action research. During the reading of these texts the majority of the teachers commented on the use of repeated readings to allow for peers to give feedback and demonstrate good reading strategies and allow for practice of the reading and vocabulary strategies taught in whole group and small group. One teacher described repeated reading and fluency pairs in which “the students read a passage with a partner multiple times and then with the teacher to track growth.”

## **Summary**

The outcome of this study showed that teachers value the results they have seen from modeling and scaffolding student learning on a daily basis. There is no set strategy or method to best enhance below level readers, as each reader requires tailored instruction. No two readers are the same. As one participant stated in her survey, “We must sharpen and refine a student’s ability to interact with text. This can take place in whole group, small group, or one-on-one, depending on the students’ level and need”. Through the utilization of whole group, small group, and partnered instruction these educators have shown that the interventions and methods used within the classroom to meet the students where they are as readers and raise their understanding based on data and evidence-based learning strategies can vary as long as the data is there to show positive student growth.

## **Implications and Limitations**

This study is relevant to students, educators, administrators, school superintendents, and Georgia school officials (GaDOE). By promoting student achievement in comprehension, the academic progress of the school system will show growth in terms of state achievement assessments. According to the Georgia Department of Education, “Students advancing through the grades are expected to meet each year’s grade-specific standards, to retain or further develop skills and understandings mastered in previous grades, and to work steadily toward meeting the more general expectations described by the Standards” (georgiastandards.org, 2019). According to the GaDOE, students have the expectation to meet grade level standards, but without the appropriate grade level foundations, this is an impossible feat; therefore, it is important to target the methods and interventions that will enable students to grow in fluency and comprehension at a high rate allowing them to advance through each grade level by meeting

the grade specific standards of that grade. By increasing reading fluency, changes will be seen not only in students' reading ability, but in other subjects as well (Akbash, Sahin, and Yaykiran, 2016). This achievement has the possibility to lead to better student grades, graduation rates, and college entrance and will in turn better the quality of the educational status among the

As the participants of this study were volunteers at one school, it can be noted that a larger number of participants and a broader context complete the survey will allow for a deeper view of the methods and interventions utilized for enhancing fluency and comprehension. All the participants were women, so a varying population in terms of gender would enhance the outcome of the study as well. The lack of gender representation and participation response can possibly be related to the current events at the time of this study in which educators were overwhelmed with the implementation of distance learning on such short notice; therefore, volunteering for this study may have been overseen and would perhaps have a large, varied population of participants if current events had cooperated.

### **Conclusion and Further Research**

As a small school system serving students of all different demographics and academic levels, it is of great importance that educators have a vertically aligned and common practice for reaching below grade level readers. There needs to be a plan in place to remediate these students' learning and help them rise above their struggles and come out on the winning side. Although this study has shown that many educators within the grades 3-5 elementary school share the same methods and interventions to do so, it is still in question as to the methods and interventions being utilized at the other schools--pre-kindergarten, primary school, middle school, and high school. It would be of great benefit to further extend this research study to create not just a school wide vertical alignment and bank of resources to help meet student needs

in the content area of reading, but also to create that alignment between each school so that students are continually receiving the same valuable instruction that is pushing them to grow and be successful learners.



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